DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 552 FL 018 653

AUTHOR Ranard, Donald A.
TITLE Mutual Assistance Associations: Refugee Self-Help Groups Play Key Role. In America: Perspectives in Refugee Resettlement, Number 8.
INSTITUTION Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC. Refugee Service Center.
SPONS AGENCY Department of State, Washington, DC. Bureau of Refugee Programs.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Collected Works - Serials (022)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Buddhism; *Culture Conflict; *Indochinese; Land Settlement; Program Effectiveness; *Refugees; Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS *Mutual Assistance Associations; Mutual Help Groups; Virginia

ABSTRACT

The history and current status of Indochinese Mutual Assistance Programs (MAAs) is reviewed, and a description is provided of the six kinds of MAAs that are found in the United States. They include the following: (1) cultural Preservation/Social Activities; (2) religious Services; (3) Special Constituency Groups; (3) Resettlement/Social Services; (4) Business and Economic Development; and (5) Advocacy and Political Action. Additional articles discuss the MAA's search for funding, their need for volunteers, the description of a successful MAA program, and a story about a Buddhist temple being planned in rural Virginia. (GLR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED321552

MUTUAL ASSISTANCE ASSOCIATIONS
Refugee Self-Help Groups Play Key Role

Donald A. Ranard

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G.R. Tucker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL018653

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

InAmerica
Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement
Number 8 • March 1990

Mutual Assistance Associations

Refugee Self-Help Groups Play Key Role

by Donald A. Ranard

"My American sponsor lived in a big house in a suburb of Boston. Everyone there was rich — I never saw such big, beautiful houses before! My sponsor was very nice, very kind. I thought how lucky I was to have such a sponsor. But then I began to feel lonely for my friends, for my culture, my language. There were no other Asians around, and after awhile I began to feel like the last Asian on earth. Isn't there anyone else who looks like me? I began to wonder."

—A Hmong refugee in Providence, Rhode Island

INDOCHINESE Mutual Assistance Associations were formed not long after the first groups of refugees arrived in the U.S. in the mid 1970s. Like other refugee and immigrant self-help groups, many MAAs began as informal gatherings for social, cultural, and spiritual purposes. They offered newcomers opportunities to celebrate their traditions, practice their religion, and find comfort in a common language and culture. Other MAAs had a focus, reflecting the interests and backgrounds of a specialized membership — women, senior citizens, college students, alumni of a particular college, members of a profession. Still others were established for political action and advocacy. These groups collected money to help refugees in Southeast Asia or worked for political candidates in their American communities.

Inside

Six Kinds of MAAs 3
Buddhist Temple in Virginia 5
Search for Funds 5
MAA Teaches Vietnamese Language and Culture ... 6

Published by the Refugee Service Center, Center for Applied Linguistics under a cooperative agreement with the Bureau for Refugee Programs of the U.S. Department of State

Many of these early MAAs also provided social services, usually on a voluntary basis. Student and professional groups, for example, were formed not only for mutual support but also to provide assistance to "at risk" members of the community, such as the elderly or young people experiencing difficulties in school.

MAAs as Service Agencies

From 1975 to 1980, only a small number of MAAs were directly funded by the federal government to provide social services to new arrivals. In 1980, following the dramatic increase in the number of arrivals into the U.S., MAA involvement in the refugee resettlement system received a boost when the newly formed Office of Refugee Resettlement singled out MAAs for special consideration and support. Since then, federal programs have provided special assistance to MAAs in an effort to encourage their participation in the service delivery system. Today, almost 200 are being funded by ORR to provide social services.

By all reports, MAAs have proven to be effective service providers, According to a 1986 study conducted for ORR, many MAAs serve refugees "as well as traditional providers, if not more effectively."

"We know what the needs are," one MAA leader said. "And since we have the same language and culture as the refugees, we provide services effectively." Another reason for the success of MAAs is their staffs' strong sense of commitment to the community. "MAAs work around the clock," another MAA director said. "We can't say 'no' to our people."

In some communities, single ethnic MAAs have banded together to form MAA coalitions. In many cases, these coalitions have been formed in order to improve funding prospects, since funders, particularly private foundations, are more apt to fund efforts that serve several ethnic groups. Other coalitions have developed for purposes of political or community advocacy.

A Need to Diversify

The International Community Center (ICC), a Washington D.C. MAA, serves not only Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodians, but people from Central America, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia, as well. In a church building a few blocks from the White House, ICC offers an array of services ranging from ESL classes and translation services to job counseling and placement. Every Sunday, it has a radio program, repeated in Vietnamese, Lao, and Khmer, to announce activities of interest to refugees and immigrants. It distributes free food to people who need emergency help, such as refugees who have been evicted from their apartments or who moved recently from other areas and don't know where to go to find the things they need. Under contract with Immigration and Naturalization services, ICC also helps refugees and immigrants apply for citizenship or permanent resident status.

In the diversity of its services and people served, ICC is the kind of organization that many MAA service agencies hope to become. Not many, however, have achieved its level of diversity. Most MAA service agencies, in fact, are still largely dependent on a single funding source, the Office of Refugee Resettlement. This dependence on one source of federal funding not only indicates an uncertain future for MAAs, but also affects the range of services MAAs provide: Since ORR funding generally focuses on the employment needs of recent arrivals, MAAs that depend on ORR funding are often unable to address the full range of community needs — the problems of youth, the psychologically troubled, refugees who are beyond the age of employment, and those no longer eligible for ORR-funded services.

"While MAAs have frequently obtained a level of effective service provision," the 1986 study concluded, "they frequently are not providing the type of assistance they would prefer to offer."

Since the 1986 study, the situation has improved, according to Diana Bui at the Indochina Resource Action Center, a Washington, D.C., organization that provides technical assistance to MAAs around the country.

"The number of MAA service agencies with a broad funding base is still relatively small, but it's growing," says Bui, who estimates that of 200 MAAs in the U.S. providing social services around 40 have managed to diversify their funding.

What has changed the situation? "Reality," says Bui. "With fewer Indochinese refugees arriving, there's less ORR money. MAAs are more

Six Kinds of MAAs

From "Understanding the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations" by the Indochina Resource Action Center:

Virtually all of the MAAs around the country can be categorized into six major types, according to their primary service or program focus.

1. Cultural Preservation/Social Activities

This category of MAAs is the most numerous. Focuses range from cultural preservation to getting together for social activities on the occasion of a traditional holiday. MAAs of this type provide the encouragement and support needed by incoming refugees. These MAAs generally operate on a voluntary basis, picking up where the domestic resettlement system left off and helping newcomers find a home in American society.

2. Religious Services

This group includes temples, pagodas, and churches, Usually headed by a monk or a priest, this type of MAA provides traditional religious services and, in many cases, informal counseling. In many areas of the country, the religious MAAs have raised enough money from the community to purchase a facility for the use of the entire community.

3. Special Constituency Groups

These are the women's groups, the senior citizen societies, specific fraternal groups such as the veterans of a certain branch of the military, alumni or students of a particular educational institution, and professional societies. Given the common, well-defined focus, these groups generally are able to mobilize volunteers and carry out a well-organized program of activities.

4. Resettlement/Social Services

These MAAs have been able to acquire funds to provide social services. The task is always far broader than the funding; the refugee community inevitably expects more services.

5. Business and Economic Development

Some MAAs have looked beyond direct resettlement assistance and developed programs with a potential to enhance economic power from within each ethnic community. They are experimenting with bold initiatives, taking well-calculated risks with the intent to build a sound financial base for the future. Their activities lay the groundwork for local refugee business associations, chambers of commerce, or community development corporations.

6. Advocacy and Political Action

Some MAAs have begun to focus on political action/advocacy as a means to make a difference. Their activities range from collecting money for refugees in Southeast Asia to election year politicking in the United States.

aware that if they're going to survive they need to find other sources of funding."

MAA Success Story

One MAA that is likely to be around for a long time is the Socioeconomic Development Center (SEDC) in Providence, Rhode Island, a coalition of Indochinese MAAs. One part of the coalition is the Khmer Association of Providence. Its development from a small informal social center to partnership in a sophisticated social service organization is an instructive success story.

Formed in 1976 by a small group of former military officers from Cambodia, the Khmer association began as a meeting place for Providence's small Cambodian community. In 1982, the MAA received an ORR grant to provide services to the growing community of Cambodian refugees in Providence. For the most part, the purpose of these services was to help new arrivals get off welfare and into jobs. "It was an important service and it made a difference," recalls S.K. "Chhem" Sip, a former director. "But there were other people in the community who weren't being served — young people having problems in school, mothers who couldn't leave home, people who had been in the U.S. too long to qualify for ORR services." Prompted by the need to offer a greater variety of services, as well as to prepare for life beyond ORR support, Chhem and his staff began looking for additional sources of funding.

They soon learned that projects serving *all* Indochinese refugees in Providence were more likely to receive funding. Thus, the idea of an MAA coalition was born. Putting the idea into practice, however, required considerable planning among the four MAAs. Their biggest concern was to design an organizational plan that would give equal authority to each MAA. The final plan was simple and effective: Two members from each ethnic community would sit on the board of directors, and the MAA coalition itself would be divided into Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, and Hmong sections, each headed by an MAA leader. The director would be elected by the board.

Today, SEDC provides a wide range of services. In addition to employment services, SEDC runs a counseling program for school youth, a program for mothers of "toddlers at risk," and ESL classes for homebound women. One-half of its funding is derived from non-ORR sources; 25% comes from private foundations.

SEDC is full of plans for the future. "There are still many people in the community who need help and aren't getting it — the elderly, substance abusers, young adults," says Chhem, who has been the executive director since the coalition's formation in 1986. One plan that could provide SEDC with a steady source of income is to set up a separate for-profit subsidiary that would offer interpreting services to local businesses, hospitals, and government agencies. SEDC's ultimate ambition, says Chhem, is to become a community-based organization that serves *all* ethnic groups in Providence.

SEDC is not a typical success story. But in its evolution from a social center to a single ethnic MAA providing employment services to one part of a diversely funded, multiethnic coalition offering a wide range of community services, SEDC reflects a pattern of development that many other MAAs may one day duplicate. ⊠

Some of the material in this article originally appear in the December 1986 issue of Information Update.

MAAs Need Volunteers

One problem that MAA service agencies face is finding volunteers, says Diana Bui at the Indochina Resource Action Center. "Once an MAA gets funded and has a paid staff, refugees in the community often think there's no longer a need for volunteers," says Bui. But, in fact, funded MAAs often depend on volunteers for many of their services. Bui's message to students in the Overseas Training Program: "Once you're in the U.S. and on your feet, think about doing some volunteer work at your local MAA."

MAAs Face Tough Search for Funds

According to a 1986 study, "Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative," many MAAs encounter "formidable barriers" when they seek funds. Among the reasons given:

"Private foundations frequently emphasize seed grants for special activities and demonstration projects rather than long-term funding. The United Way has stringent organizational requirements (specifying board size, etc.) and an arduous application process that requires a demonstrated successful service record. Corporate, individual, and church contributions are often small or in-kind. Finally, many state and local government agencies feel that funding of refugee-related activities is an ORR responsibility and they are unwilling to commit public funds to these purposes."

MAAs also find it hard to raise money in their own ethnic communities, the report pointed out. The study notes several factors:

- **the members of the community who benefit most from the MAA — that is, the clients — usually have the least to donate;**
- **members of the community often see government as the proper funder of social services;**
- **MAAs that focus on the delivery of ORR-funded services are often unable to address other community needs, and as a result, may lose community support.**

Buddhists to Build Temple in Rural Virginia

THERE seems nothing unusual about the barn, sitting in a field a few hundred yards behind a two-story brick house in the middle of the Virginia countryside. But to enter the barn is to step into a world that is dramatically different from the one outside: Brightly-colored paper flags hang on strings attached to the rafters, and on the far side of the barn, facing the entrance, is an altar, festooned with flowers and silver cones. Behind the altar, on a raised platform, there is a second altar on which a four-foot high golden Buddha sits surrounded by flowers and cones. In front of the second altar, there are four mats. Here, during ceremonies, is where the temple's four monks sit.

The barn, the house, and the surrounding 58 acres belong to the Lao Buddhist Society of Northern Virginia. As a place of worship, the barn is temporary, to be repaced within the next five years or so, by a real temple, built in the traditional Lao style. The five-year plan does not seem unrealistic: It took the society only eight months to raise $110,00 for a down payment on the $265,000 farm and another four years to pay off the balance.

"We wanted to have our own temple," says Phouratsamy, president of the society and a driving force behind the temple. Phouratsamy has lived in the United States for over 20 years. She is a suburban mother of two teenagers and a Lao language broadcaster at the Voice of America, but when she visits the temple, as she does four or five times a week, Phouratsamy wears the white robe of a lay nun. When her children are grown, she plans to become a fully ordained nun and move into the temple for good.

Before the influx of Lao refugees into Northern Virginia in the late 1970s, the small Lao community there used to attend a Thai temple, Phouratsamy says. "Then when the refugees started coming, we began hearing stories of Lao monks in the camps," she says. "That's when we got the idea of sponsoring a monk." In 1980, the first monk arrived. With money raised from the

Lao community, by then one of the largest in the U.S., the society bought and renovated a house in Springfield, Virginia for the monk.

"Because the house was in a residential area, we weren't allowed to hold religious ceremonies there, and anyway it was too small, so we began to look around for a better place," Phouratsamy says. In 1984, the society found the 58-acre farm. Part of the appeal of the place was its remote location. The farm is in the middle of the Virginia countryside, 30 miles from Washington. "We figured that out here no one would bother us," says Phouratsamy.

They figured wrong, as it turned out: Their plan to turn the farm into a religious center met with almost immediate resistance from members of the local community. "They seemed afraid that we were going to steal their children," says Phouratsamy. A letter signed by 35 residents opposing the Buddhist proposal stated "a concern as to what effect the society may have on our young people. We are all too mindful of the insidious invasion of other societies into family life and communities in the name of religion."

At a community hearing to discuss the issue, eleven Americans spoke in support of the society. One of them was former U.S. Ambassador to Laos Charles S. Whitehouse. Describing the Buddhists as a quiet, unobtrusive people who behave in a "dignified" and "respectful" manner, Whitehouse assured the community that "this religion is not going to be proselytizing and shaking tambourines in shopping malls." Despite these assurances, community opposition continued for a year, until the matter finally went to court. The society won the decision. Phouratsamay says she is not bitter about the year-long battle. "I think when they understand who we are, they will accept us," she says with Buddhist equanimity.

Since 1985, three more monks have joined the

MAA Teaches Vietnamese Language and Culture

For most students, summer is a three-month break between school years, but for several hundred Vietnamese students in Arlington, Virginia, summer marks the end of one semester — and the beginning of another.

Each year, around 300 Vietnamese students between the ages of 5 and 20 spend part of their summer studying Vietnamese language, history, and culture. Those that need it can also get special help in math.

The classes are offered by the Vietnamese Youth Educational Association, an Arlington, Virginia MAA formed in 1977. Vietnamese language classes range from basic literacy to Vietnamese literature. Each of the seven levels has its own texts, written by the staff. While the course on culture focuses on traditional Vietnamese behavior, it encourages a bicultural model of adaptation. "We tell our students that they are Vietnamese people in America," says Chu Ba Anh, president of the association. "There are times they need to behave in the American manner, and there are times they need to act in the Vietnamese way."

With a staff of 50, the program offers each student a lot of attention, Chu says. Each class has a teacher and at least one assistant. All of the teachers are volunteers; several are college students. One teacher is a former student who worked his way through the program, then returned to teach as a volunteer after his graduation from college.

temple. Each has his own bedroom in the four-bedroom house, and on most days, the saffron-robed monks can be seen outside working in the garden or cutting the grass. They also spend a lot of time on the telephone, they say, giving advice to members of the Lao community, often to parents concerned about their children.

The monks say they like the quiet of the countryside, though there is one disadvantage to their rural retreat, they admit. "In Laos, the temple was in the middle of the village," says Chandaphone, one of the monks. "The children would play on the temple grounds. It was a very familiar place to them, not a place to be afraid of. They would get to know the monks this way, and some of them would want to become monks themselves. But here the temple is separate from the community, and an unfamiliar place to many young people."

In order to make the temple a more familiar place, the society sponsors activities for young people. On the weekends, there are Lao literacy classes as well as religious instruction at the temple, and when the weather is good, there is soccer, volleyball, ping pong and kickball in the field next to the barn. Each summer, 20 to 30 boys spend a week or two in the temple as novices. A Buddhist youth group has been formed to help out during ceremonies and festivals. Someday the monks hope to start a school where young people can study Buddhism.

"Many young Lao people come to America and see all the things and all the freedom, and they don't know where to stop: As soon as they have one thing, they want another. This can make them unhappy. From Buddhism, they can learn moderation. They can learn how to enjoy their lives."

—Phouratsamy

How relevant is Buddhism to young Lao people in the United States? "I think it's relevant," says Phouratsamy. "Many young Lao people come to America and see all the things and all the freedom, and they don't know where to stop: As soon as they have one thing, they want another. This can make them unhappy. From Buddhism, they can learn moderation. They can learn how to enjoy their lives." ⊠

Sources

Center for Applied Linguistics. 1986. Mutual Assistance Associations Serve Refugee Communities. *Information Update*, 9: 14–22. Washington, DC: CAL.

Indochina Resource Action Center. 1988. Understanding the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations. Washington, DC: IRAC. (Paper.)

Khoa, Le Xuan & Diana D. Bui. 1985. Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations: An Approach for Community Development. In T. C. Owan (Ed.), *Southeast Asian Mental Health: Treatment, Prevention, Services, Training, and Research*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Lewin and Associates, Refugee Policy Group, and Berkeley Planning Associates. 1986. *Assessment of the MAA Incentive Grant Initiative*. Washington, DC: Office of Refugee Resettlement.

In America

Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement

Writer/editor
Donald A. Ranard

Production & design
Sonia Kundert

In America **has been developed and printed under a cooperative agreement with the Bureau for Refugee Programs of the U.S. Department of State. The material appearing herein does not necessarily represent the policy of that agency, nor the endorsement of the federal government.**

In America **is published six times a year and distributed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037.**

The contents of this publication are in the public domain and may be reproduced.

Refugee Service Center
Center for Applied Linguistics
1118 22nd Street NW
Washington DC 20037

nonprofit organization
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Washington DC
Permit No. 9429

Third Class Mail